Theodore Solotaroff
on Herbert Gold

John Maddox
on modern biology

Robert Maurer
on James Jones

BOOK WEEK

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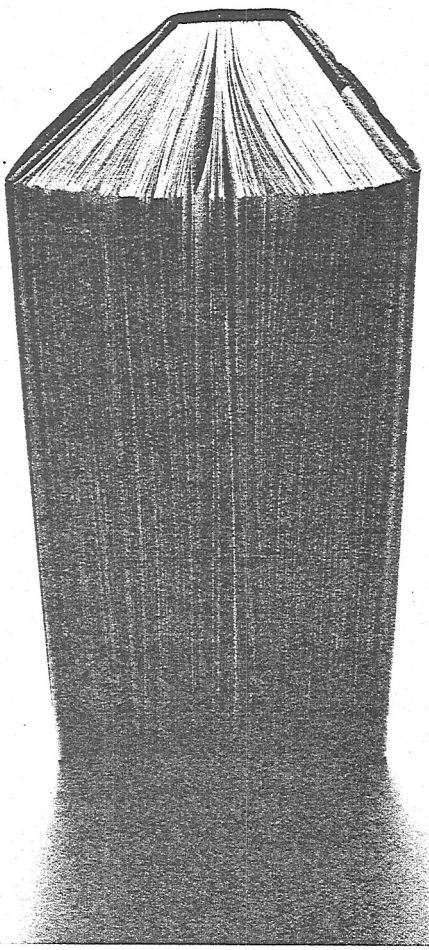
The Washington Post

A TWIST OF HISTORY

Two views of William Manchester's 'The Death of a President'



By Alistair Cooke

The harrowing, and successful, business of reliving the Dallas nightmare has involved Mr. Manchester, his publishers, the Kennedys, a clutch of onlooking politicians, and the world's press in such a din of recrimination, theories of history, accusations of lying and bad taste that the finished book is in danger of being considered as simply the last cannonade of a wounded author.

The dispute is already more famous than the book, a conclusion that will be agreeable to nobody but the amateur McLuhans, who will be eager to point out that if the medium is the message, the dispute *is* the book. For millions who will never read it, so it will remain: a reaction against the first beautiful friendship with the Kennedys, a headlong revelation of State secrets that the contending factions of the Democrats would like to see suppressed, a disguised political pamphlet debunking Bobby Kennedy's claims on the Presidency, an "exposure" of LBJ, a bigger *MacBird,* and many other absurdities, any and all of which can be deduced by anybody sniffing around for malign motives.

The reviewer is no Justice Holmes, either. He is no more capable of "an open mind" than any other reader. He too has been bat- *(Continued on page 2)*

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT: November 20—November 25, 1963. By William Manchester. Harper & Row. 710 pp. $10.

By Gore Vidal

At any given moment only a handful of people are known to almost everyone in the world. Mr. and Mrs. Richard Burton, the Kennedys . . . and the list is already near its end. There are of course those who enjoy reading about the late Sir Winston Churchill and the never-late General de Gaulle, but their fans are relatively few. Interest in Lyndon Johnson the man (as opposed to the warrior) is alarmingly slight. In fact, of the world's chiefs-of-state, only the enigmatic Mao Tse-tung can be said to intrigue the masses. There is something perversely gratifying in the fact that in an age of intense gossip and global publicity so few people are known to both the alert Malaysian and the average American. Things were different of course in the small world of Europe's dark ages. Numerous heroes were much sung while everyone knew the Bible. As a result, painters had a subject, scholars had something to argue about, poets had a point of departure. But the idea of Christendom died in Darwin's study and now perhaps the only thing that we may all be said to hold in common is Bobby and Teddy and Jackie, and the memory of the dead President. Is it enough?

Mr. William Manchester thinks so, and his testament, *The Death of a President,* is very much a work of love, even passion. As we learned in the course of his notorious agony *(Continued on page 2)*

Gore Vidal

(Continued from page 1) last year, the sun set for him when John Kennedy died. Happily, the sun has since risen and Mr. Manchester can now take satisfaction in knowing that he, too, is part of history, a permanent footnote to an Administration which is beginning to look as if it may itself be simply a glamorous footnote to that voluminous text, The Age of Johnson. But whether or not Camelot will continue to exert its spell (and perhaps, like Brigadoon, rematerialize), Mr. Manchester has written a book hard to resist reading, even though one knows in advance everything that is going to happen. Breakfast in Fort Worth. Flight to Dallas. Governor Connally. The roses. The sun. The friendly crowds. The Governor's wife: "Well, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you, Mr. President." And then one hopes that for once the story will be different—the car swerves, the bullets miss, and the splendid progress continues. But each time, like a recurrent nightmare, the handsome head is shattered. It is probably the only story that everyone in the world knows by heart. Therefore it is, in the truest sense, legend, and like all legends it can bear much repetition and reinterpretation. In classical times, every Greek playgoer knew that sooner or later Electra would recognize Orestes, but the manner of recognition varies significantly from teller to teller.

Mr. Manchester's final telling of the death of Kennedy is most moving: it is also less controversial than one had been led to believe by those who read the original manuscript and found the portrait of President Johnson unflattering. According to the current text, Johnson seems a bit inadequate but hardly villainous. The Kennedys, on the other hand, blaze with lights, the author's love apparent on every page. That love, however, did his writing little service, for the prose of the book is not good—the result, no doubt, of the strain under which the author was compelled to work. Certainly the style shows none of the ease which marked his first book on Kennedy, nor is there any trace of that elegance with which he once portrayed H. L. Mencken. Yet the crowded, overwritten narrative holds. Mr. Manchester is too haughty in his dismissal of the plot-theory, and altogether too confident in analyzing Oswald's character ("in fact, he was going mad"). Nevertheless, if the best the detractors of the book can come up with is a photograph proving that, contrary to what Mr. Manchester has written, a number of Kennedy courtiers did indeed attend the swearing-in of the new President, then it is safe to assume that he has apparently accomplished what he set out to do: describe accurately what happened at Dallas, and immediately after.

Apparently. For there is a certain mystery about the origins of the book. It is known that the Kennedys approached Mr. Manchester and asked him to write the "official" version of the assassination. But in this age of image-making, politicians are never simply motivated. Whatever the moment's purpose, everything must serve it. Certainly nothing must get out of hand, as the Kennedys know better than anyone, for they were stung once before by a writer. Preparing for 1960, they gave Professor James MacGregor Burns a free hand to write what, in effect, was to be a campaign biography of John Kennedy. The result was a work of some candor which still remains the best analysis of the 35th President's character. But the candor which gave the book its distinction did not at all please its subject or his family. References to Joe Kennedy's exuberant anti-Semitic outbursts combined with a shrewd analysis of John Kennedy's ambivalent attitude toward McCarthy caused irritation. Therefore the next writer must be tractable.

The starry-eyed Mr. Manchester seemed made to order. He was willing to swear loyalty. More important, he was willing to sign agreements. With some confidence, Lancelot and Guinevere confided him the task of celebrating the fallen hero. The comedy began. Right off, there was the matter of President Johnson. Whatever Mr. Manchester's original feelings about Johnson, he could not have spent all those hours com-

Gore Vidal's new novel, Washington, D. C., *will be published next month.*

Alistair Cooke

(Continued from page 1) tered by the charges and counter-charges and it would be coy, at this stage, to pretend to no opinions about the plaintiffs and the defendants in the cases of Kennedy vs. Manchester and Harper & Row, *Look* vs. *Stern*, not to mention such subsidiary feuds as never made the docket: Manchester vs. Goodwin, Manchester vs. Schlesinger, Manchester vs. Salinger, Manchester vs. Randolph Churchill.

So I think it a good idea for a reviewer to express, if only as a purge before the feast of Manchester, his own feelings and provisional conclusions about the dispute. It seems to me that Manchester's original motive was plainly honorable. He wanted to write a thorough account of the murder of a President for whom he had immense though, on the evidence of his earlier *Portrait of a President*, dangerously unalloyed admiration. I say "dangerously" because it would make him more vulnerable to the emotional persuasions of the family and to the conscious or semi-conscious political pressures of the family's court. We do not need to hold any murky preconceptions about the Kennedys to appreciate the kind of fix he would find himself in if he appeared to them to trespass on intimacies or embarrassments that he felt essential to the honesty of the narrative. At the start, Manchester was walking into the maze that confronts all authors of family-commissioned books, which Mark Schorer magnificently navigated in his biography of Sinclair Lewis, from which Harold Nicolson emerged with a bruised conscience and a "soft and flabby" biography of Dwight Morrow after he had trimmed it to placate the sensibilities of the Morrows and the House of Morgan. Commissioned books are always delicate properties; not one in a hundred comes off, because a good writer is usually unable to satisfy his dual obligation to write the truth as he sees it and also to write only the truth that might not hurt his employer.

If rumor is correct, Theodore White and Walter Lord were offered the commission and wisely turned it down. Mr. Manchester could say, and I believe has said, that no one could possibly attempt a full account of the assassination and the events surrounding it unless he had access to the unique recollections of Mrs. Kennedy and the Kennedy entourage. All the rest is legwork, and Mr. Manchester is a marathon legman. The Kennedy reminiscences were too precious to resist, and Mr. Manchester's more splenetic critics should ask themselves if they would have foregone the priceless opportunity he was offered, on any other ground than that of high principle.

At any rate, he seized it, and what was required from him now was not the reporter's skill, which he has in abundance, or a sympathetic ear, which his earlier book amply proved, but great tact and a narrative organizing gift at least the equal of that of Theodore White in digesting and dramatizing a similar wild mess of experience. But Mr. White's book was his own, and Mr. Manchester was—for all the memorandum of agreement and the protestations of minimal censorship—an employee. He was employed to write the Authorized Version and he found, at some point, that he had a *Gone With the Wind* in his future. Whatever that point was (it appears to be more or less agreed that it was Mrs. Kennedy's shock at the price of the magazine serialization) it released Manchester not from his prior Kennedy compact but from his sense of dependence on the Kennedys. When all the raw material was in, which he couldn't have gathered without them, he saw himself a free man, and pretty soon a famous one. It is an Ibsen plot, with no heroes and no villains; only a cast of enthusiasts suddenly awash in an ocean of disillusion and mutual suspicion, drowning each other in the certain conviction that Truth was their only course.

When the controversy has faded, there will be the book. It is here and it asks to be judged. The catch is that a reviewer so close to the event is caught up in the book's vortex, in a swirl of detail and gossip and hysteria that leaves you gasping for some lifeline to hold on to, when the author himself has scorned a lifeline, a plot, a judgment, and hurled the thing at you as a mass of undifferentiated experience, a happening.

Mr. Manchester's method is what you might call non-selective documentary, an assembly-line of infinite ingredients whose monotonous movement is teased, for the sake of suspense, by stoppings and startings and flashbacks. If it were a novel it might suggest a brave pastiche of Jules Romains' *Men of Good Will*, which was meant to "fix," in 27 volumes, the world of pre-war and wartime Paris once for all as a Balzacian family album. It is a perilous method in the hands of someone who, unlike Balzac or Dickens, cannot handle the bulk, proportion the detail into a dramatic narrative and, most of all, give the enormous cast of contemporary characters a separate life of their own.

Romains' work is pretty nearly forgotten already because, I believe, the reader is ultimately choked or fatigued by the mass of undigested detail and incident, and the contemporaries are forgotten.

Mr. Manchester's book is not a novel, but he shares Romains' assets and liabilities. He is quoting hundreds of known and unknown living persons on private occasions and, for the time being, the stuff is very titillating (How much did the Oswalds' sexual troubles trigger the assassination? Is de Gaulle really such an egomaniac? Fancy Galbraith, Harriman, O'Donnell *et al.* saying *that!*). If it were a novel, we should take his word for it and regret merely that so many indistinguishable midgets impede the movement of the principals and postpone the deepening of the characters and their relationships. As it is, the whole thing bristles with doubts and alarms. How does he *know* that Marina Oswald and Ruth Paine held these particular intimate conversations, that Godfrey McHugh felt as he did, that "Lieutenant Lee's sword shimmered . . . in the flickering torchlight"? It is the same embarrassment that plagues those fictional biographies of Napoleon, Alexander Graham Bell, Teddy Roosevelt, Victor Hugo ("He was feeling irritable on that April morning, ate alone, gobbled his eggs and continually tugged at his mustache over the thought of this secret betrayal"). This may be called the "Vass You Dere, Sharlie?" school of biography; and Mr. Manchester's work is a mammoth contribution to it.

The trouble—and the triumph—is that there are

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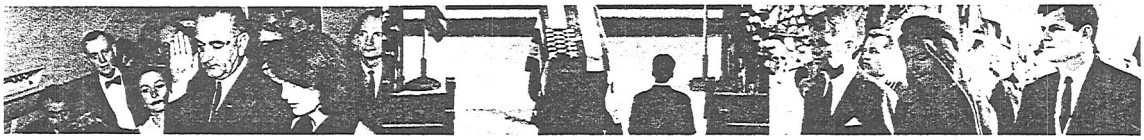
muning with members of the exiled court and not sense that they felt it was a disaster for the country to have that vulgar, inept boor in Jack's place. The Kennedys have always been particularly cruel about Johnson, and their personal disdain is reflected and magnified by those around them, particularly their literary apologists of whom Mr. Manchester was now one. When at last he submitted his work to the family, they proved too great and too sensitive to read it for themselves. Instead friends were chosen to pass on the contents of the book. The friends found the anti-Johnson tone dangerous in the political context of the moment. They said so, and Mr. Manchester obediently made changes, the chief being the excision of a rustic scene in which blood-lusting Lyndon forces squeamish Jack to shoot a deer who, apparently, resembled Bambi. But Mr. Manchester's true ordeal did not begin until Mr. Richard Goodwin, a former aide to President Johnson, read the manuscript and found fault. He alarmed Mrs. Kennedy with tales of how what she had said looked in cold print. As a result, she threatened to sue if large cuts were not made. The rest is history. Some cuts were made. Some were not. At last the publishers grew weary: the text could not be further altered. To their amazement, Mrs. Kennedy brought suit against them. Meanwhile, in communicating her displeasure to Mr. Manchester, she reminded him that so secure was she in the pantheon of American heroines, no one could hope to cross her and survive—"unless I run off with Eddie Fisher," she added drolly. Needless to say, Mrs. Kennedy had her way, as the world knows.

It is now reasonable to assume that Mr. Manchester is not the same man he was before he got involved with the Kennedys. But though one's sympathy is with him, one must examine the matter from the Kennedy point of view. They are playing a great and dangerous game: they want the Presidency of the United States and they will do quite a lot to regain it. By reflecting accurately their view of Johnson, Mr. Manchester placed in jeopardy their immediate political future. But simply, they do not want, in 1967, to split fatally the Democratic Party. Unhappily for them, Mr. Manchester's sense of history did not accommodate this necessary fact. Nevertheless, since he was, in their eyes, a "hired" writer, he must tell the story their way or not at all. As it turned out, he did pretty much what they wanted him to do. But in the process of publicly strong-arming Mr. Manchester and the various publishers involved, the Kennedys gave some substance to those "vicious" rumors (so often resorted to by polemicists) that they are ruthless and perhaps not very lovable after all. As a result, Mr. Manchester's contribution to history may prove not to be the writing of this book so much as being the unwitting agent who allowed the innocent millions an unexpected glimpse of a preternaturally ambitious family furiously at work manipulating history in order that they might rise.

It was inevitable that sooner or later popular opinion would go against this remarkable family. In nature there is no action without reaction, no raising up without a throwing down. It does not take a particularly astute political observer to detect the public's change of mood toward the Kennedys. Overt ambition has always caused unease in the Republic, while excessive busyness makes for fatigue. Since our electorate is easily alarmed—and as easily bored—political ascent has always been hazardous, and the way strewn with discarded idols.

Mrs. Kennedy, in particular, is a victim of the public's fickleness. Undeserving of their love, she is equally undeserving of their dislike. But then it is a most terrible thing to live out a legend, and one wonders to what extent the Kennedys themselves understand just what was set in motion for them by their father's will that they be great. Theirs is indeed the story of our time and, if nothing else, the noisy quarrel with Mr. Manchester made vivid for everyone not only their arrogance but their poignancy. They are unique in our history, and the day they leave the public scene will be a sad one, for not only will we have lost a family as much our own as it is theirs, we shall have also lost one of the first shy hints since Christianity's decline that there may indeed be such a thing as fate, and that tragedy is not merely a literary form of little relevance in the age of common men but a continuing fact of the human condition, requiring that the over-reacher be struck down and in his fall, we, the chorus, experience awe, and some pity. ❧



enough episodes so eerily and circumstantially reported (imagined?) that, all later witnesses to the contrary, this will remain the account that stays in the mind, a legend as tough to refine or replace as that of Mrs. Kennedy and Camelot.

As an attempt at a first-rate piece of journalism, the book offers no insight that goes beneath the surface of the events, the participants, and their reported dialogue. You are left to draw conclusions which may well run counter to Mr. Manchester's intentions: that Mrs. Kennedy is at first a pitiable and compelling figure and then a young harridan in a trance; that LBJ emerges with more sense and dignity than anybody, on the plane ride back to Washington, and that the Kennedy team seems to have behaved naturally and atrociously. And so on.

I do not know whether it is history or not, but I am certain it will be gorgeous—and highly disputed—raw material for historians of the future. Before Manchester, history was thought of as an attempt to reach a judgment after events have had time to simmer. To critics who must now face an encyclopedia of Winchelliana, Mr. Manchester will be seen to lack almost everything hitherto prescribed for contemporary historians: sustained political insight, resistance to cliche, the ability to sift significant trivia from hearsay, the disinterested air of a judge hovering over a welter of testimony. Theodore White, it will be said, organized and mastered the intricacies of plot and character that marched towards a denouement: The Presidency. But Manchester's denouement comes early, it is the assassination itself; and all the rest is a kind of homicide squad's attempt —nonetheless fascinating—to keep tabs on the disintegration of the plot and everybody in it. It is consequently a reporter's nightmare, recollected in a state of unflagging tension.

That this was Mr. Manchester's aim is made clear by the end papers of the book, on which is printed a five-day chronology designed to help you keep your head when all about you are losing theirs. At 9:15 on Thursday, Nov. 21st, we learn, "Caroline kisses her father goodbye." At 11:05, the President's plane (AF1) "leaves Andrews at 550 m.p.h." At 2:00 p.m. "LBJ gets a haircut." 4:52 p.m. clocks the "last hour of serenity for JFK and JBK." At 9:55 p.m. "LHO (Oswald) checks his carbine (C2766)."

The moment you start to ask if it is essential to know that LBJ takes haircuts, and precisely when Caroline kissed her father, the book would seem to fall apart. But what falls apart is the reader's tolerance of a kind of history that is not trying to judge between what is trivial and what is significant and his patience with a prose style that is similarly headlong: the die is cast, disaster strikes, glances fleet, people "go for the jugular," the Oswalds' quarrel is "a confrontation," nights speed on, oak leaves lie "in sodden arabesques," a masterpiece (Senator Mansfield's funeral oration) is "authentic." As a work of literature, the book is a shaggy compendium of Ian Fleming narrative, news-magazine melodrama, Drew Pearson, imitation Dos Passos, airplane schedules, and the *Ladies Home Journal*.

But literature, I take it, is not Mr. Manchester's aim. He is deliberately shoveling at us a mountain of minutiae from which historians 50 or 100 years from now will trace the true plot, judge the characters fairly, be forever grateful to an author as insatiable as Suetonius for fact and detail, consequence, inconsequence, time, place, smell, rumor, gossip. Suetonius was the first keyhole reporter and, according to Plutarch, a scoundrel. But the history of the later Caesars would be incomparably the poorer without him. We remember Tiberius' fondness for having little boys run between his legs but cannot remember the system of necromancy by which he ruled the state. This seems to me to be the proper warning to people who will hanker to judge, and discredit, this book according to the standards by which they judge Macaulay (later pronounced an appalling historian) or Namier or Acton or Brogan.

But how, then, to judge it if not as literature or history but as a far more challenging Mod form? The apotheosis of Pop, perhaps? As a television documentary with all the bloopers left in? A riot caught by Telstar? It is closer to the transcript of a grand jury hearing in which every accusation, aspersion, quarrel, contradiction, he-said, she-said, is reproduced like the playback of a bugged tape.

The rationale, we hear on all sides, is very like that of the *cinema verite* boys: the "people" have a right to *know, now, everything* that happened *between everybody* on the way from Washington to Dallas and back again, until poor Kennedy (who would have loathed the whole business—the prolonged nostalgia, and the martyrdom and the sentimentality of the eternal flame and the continuing dirge) is finally put *in* his grave. It sounds awfully modern and unflinching to demand this as yet another "right" of citizenship. It is also maudlin and half-baked; and to many people today, I honestly believe it will be no more useful than the compulsive picking of a scab. A grand jury rejects or brings in an indictment. A court asks for corroboration. But who shall decide, in the whirling reportage of these pages, that Harriman or General Clifton or Schlesinger and O'Donnell and the others said what is attributed to them, when so many of them have denied their dialogue? And if Mrs. Kennedy's feelings are to be the only touchstone of discretion and charity in this chronicle, and if she really did say "There was Governor Connally squealing like a stuck pig," then how about the feelings of the Governor and his wife, who still live?

General George C. Marshall refused the gaudiest offers to have his memoirs published while he lived because he was resolved not to offend either the quick or the dead; neither the colleagues and allies who could no longer answer back, nor the living survivors (Mrs. Roosevelt, in particular) who might have been hurt by the revelation of disagreements with President Roosevelt, whose decisions in some arguments might therefore have appeared to entail a needless loss of lives.

This is an old-fashioned scruple not much in evidence in this instant history. The General squared his scruple and the historical record by dictating his account and putting it under an embargo. Mr. Manchester believes the time is now. And whether he is right or wrong, and whether the Republic is to be convulsed with destructive doubts about its leaders, the Jet Age is on his side. Prudence, taste, the stability of the government, the better part of wisdom and all those other square attributes notwithstanding, the tape recorder is *with it, man*, and will carry us along by the sheer availability of the instant image, the instant sound, the instant news. It is a best seller written for the snooper's world that Marshall McLuhan calls "the global village." ❧